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# Angels and Demons in the Pages of Lebor na hUidre

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## Introduction

*Serglige Con Culainn* is a daunting text in a number of ways, but one rightly renowned for its account of a non-Christian Otherworld, among the richest in early Irish literature.<sup>1</sup> The editor of the *Serglige*, Myles Dillon, regarded celebration of “the Irish Elysium” as one of its principal literary virtues, and other scholars have concurred that the tale exists, or at least survives, primarily as a vehicle for its account of the Edenic island kingdom of Manannán mac Lir.<sup>2</sup> In *Lebor na hUidre*, the text of *Serglige Con Culainn* concludes with a colophon which suggests that the Otherworldly beings, the *áes síde*, with whom Cú Chulainn has been mingling in this story set in a time before the coming of the Faith, were demons, who had considerable power over humans in those days.<sup>3</sup> In a vivid evocation of the Christian milieu in which the extant text of the *Serglige* was composed, John Carey has explained the colophon by suggesting that the author of the so-called A-recension was so fascinated by the mystery and beauty of the pagan Otherworld that he felt obliged to append to his tale a pious, but perhaps half-hearted, acknowledgment that the *áes síde* were actually *demna*, demons.<sup>4</sup>

For my part, I am not so sure that there was nothing more to *Serglige Con Culainn* for its redactors or for the scribes who wrote it into *Lebor na hUidre* than guilty pleasure in its descriptions of a paradisiacal Otherworld. I believe that we may more fully imagine and understand the ways in which medieval Irish monastic culture thought about the Otherworld of the *Serglige Con Culainn* by reading the tale against a background of texts that treat the *Christian* Otherworld of heaven and hell. In the

codicological context of *Lebor na hUidre*, its principal manuscript source, *Serglige Con Culainn* looks not so much like a furtive meditation on the pleasures of the *side* as it is part of a sustained exploration of Otherworlds both Christian and pagan, an exploration based in an early medieval Christian epistemology of the Otherworld. There is much to be learned, moreover, from shifting some of our attention from the nature of the early Irish Otherworld in *Serglige Con Culainn* to the various ways in which contact is made with that Otherworld; these bear a telling relationship to conventional medieval Christian thinking about human knowledge of the spirit world. The tension between Christian and pagan which was so pervasively productive in medieval Irish literary culture is certainly present. The contrast is posed, however, not simply in terms of the imaginative attractions of a material paradise on the one hand and pious Christian preoccupations on the other. Rather, the scribes read Cú Chulainn's adventures in Mag Mell against others' experiences of the Christian heaven and hell, and they seem to keep their eyes keenly trained on the means and circumstances of these occurrences. The authentication and evaluation of visionary experience appears to be a major concern of the section of *Lebor na hUidre* in which *Serglige Con Culainn* is inscribed, and indeed, of the text itself.

### **Serglige Con Culainn in Lebor na hUidre**

*Serglige Con Culainn* is preserved in two manuscripts, the late eleventh-/early twelfth-century *Lebor na hUidre* or *Leabhar na hUidhre* (LU, Royal Irish Academy MS 23 E 25) and the much later Trinity College Dublin MS 1363 (formerly TCD H.4.22). Although there has been some disagreement as to whether the text of the *Serglige* in the

later manuscript derives directly or indirectly from the text in *Lebor na hUidre*, there is general accord that the later text is ultimately dependent on the one in LU.<sup>5</sup>

LU, as students of medieval Irish literature well know, is a complicated manuscript in a number of ways. First of all, there is the matter of its three scribes: A, as he is conventionally known, who began the writing of the manuscript; M (for Mael Muire mac Célechair, d. 1106),<sup>6</sup> who took over from A and is the main scribe; and the Reviser, conventionally known as H, for “Homilist”, because he interpolated into the manuscript the two homiletic texts known as *Scéla Laí Brátha* and the *Scéla na Esérge*. In addition to interpolations, H made extensive revisions in texts throughout the manuscript, as he did in the *Serglige*, where he intercalated two leaves to accommodate the beginning of the tale as he chose to tell it, and erased extensively in order to record his version of Cú Chulainn’s journey to the Otherworld.

The intervention of the Reviser, however, is not the only problem that one faces in any attempt to analyse *Lebor na hUidre*. At least half of the original leaves have been lost from the volume, as is apparent from gaps in both a medieval and a later, seventeenth-century, foliation.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, as R.I. Best and Osborn Bergin observed in their edition of the manuscript, “when the volume was bound and repaired in 1881, the gatherings were taken asunder, the leaves separated from their conjugates and laid down singly on parchment mounts, so that it is no longer possible to determine their relations to one another, or the number and makeup of the various gatherings or quires.”<sup>8</sup> Bearing in mind these facts, which must render very tentative any conclusions that we draw, we may proceed to consider the nature of *Lebor na hUidre*.

Gearóid Mac Eoin has written aptly that, “it is clear that [the] two scribes set out to compile a book of tales, for there are few items in it which are not narrative and in this it differs from other early manuscripts . . . and what is here of religious matter is narrative in character.”<sup>9</sup> The *Serglige* is written on pages folios 43-50 of this narrative miscellany, the last in a sequence of texts that concern themselves, in one way or another, with knowledge of the Otherworld. This sequence, I suggest, commences with *Fís Adomnán* at page 27a, according to the nineteenth-century pagination that is the conventional system of reference,<sup>10</sup> and continues at least through the conclusion of *Serglige Con Culainn* at page 50b14. According to the analysis of Best and Bergin, there seem to be no leaves lost from page 27 through page 54.<sup>11</sup> As they read the manuscript, the alphabetical signatures that constitute the medieval foliation are continuous in this stretch, as are the numbers of the seventeenth-century foliation.<sup>12</sup> Accordingly, while we have no way of knowing anything about the original quiring of these leaves, it is reasonable to believe that they accurately represent the original order of texts in the manuscript—after the Reviser had done his work, at any rate. The “sequence of texts” dealing with the Otherworld, in other words, almost certainly has an integrity dating back to the time when H revised *Lebor na hUidre*.

*Fís Adomnán* commences at the top of the first column of page 27. The opening lines were written by A, and the rest by M. Cast formally as a sermon on Psalm 146:5-6, *Fís Adomnán* is a narrative account, composed in the tenth or eleventh century, of the vision of heaven and hell granted to Adomnán, abbot of Iona from 679-704, “when his soul departed from his body on the feast of John the Baptist, and was taken to heaven with the angels of heaven, and to hell with its rabble host.”<sup>13</sup> The text ends in the second

column of the recto of a folio (page 31b), with the explicit “*finit amen finit.*”(LU lines 2300-2301). There is no doubt, in other words, that it is complete from the scribe’s point of view.

At this point the Reviser intervenes, erasing much of column b and the entire verso of the same folio, in order to make room for *Scéla Laí Brátha*, followed by *Scéla na Esérgi*--the homilies that earned him his tag from R.I. Best.<sup>14</sup> *Scéla Laí Brátha* is a description of Doomsday derived from Matthew 25:30-46, with a certain debt to the writings of Gregory the Great, and it is in fact attributed in the manuscript to Matthew.<sup>15</sup> *Scéla na Esérgi* expounds medieval lore concerning the condition of bodies at the resurrection—their age, sex and integrity, the length of hair and nails, and so on—with explicit reference to Augustine and Gregory as authorities on these matters.<sup>16</sup> Neither of these texts is known from any source other than *Lebor na hUidre*.

We do not know what was erased and replaced here; indeed, we cannot exclude the possibility that H was simply replacing other versions of *Scéla Laí Brátha* and *Scéla na Esérgi* with versions that he regarded as more complete, more authoritative, or in some other way simply better. However, assuming that the two “homilies” are his addition to the manuscript, it is not difficult to imagine that it was *Fís Adomnán*, with its eschatological preoccupation with the nature of the afterlife, that inspired the Reviser to interpolate two related apocalyptic texts at this point.<sup>17</sup>

After *Scéla na Esérgi*, the hand of M resumes, recording the text of *Aided Nath Í*.<sup>18</sup> This story would seem at first glance to represent a turning away from the eschatological and explicitly Christian preoccupations of *Fís Adomnán* toward matters historical and secular. Nath Í, king of Ireland and in some sources the successor of Niall

Noígiallach before Loegaire, attacks Forménus, “King of Thrace,” in his tower in the Alps, where he has retired as a hermit. Forménus escapes when he is miraculously swept off to heaven in a ball of fire, and Nath Í is struck dead by a bolt of lightning. His body is brought back to Ireland by his son and eventually buried at Crúachain. This odd little story is told in not many more words than it has taken to recount it here, and the rest of the tale, in the words of Máire West, “is used as a vehicle for the enumeration in prose and verse of lists of the famous mythological personalities said by tradition to have been laid to rest in Cruachain and in other more important pagan burial places in Ireland.”<sup>19</sup>

*Aided Nath Í* can certainly be read in terms of LU’s interest in secular narrative, but with Forménus ascending to heaven like Elijah in his fiery chariot (2 Kings 2:11), it might also be said to betray the same sort of fascination with the ways and means by which mortals achieve the transition from this world to the next that is a feature of *Fís Adomnán*, *Scéla Laí Brátha* and *Scéla na Esérge*. Both M, scribe of *Fís Adomnán*, and the Reviser, H, appear to have been interested in these matters.

*Aided Nath Í* is written by the principal scribe, M. However, the Reviser demonstrates here, as he does elsewhere in the manuscript, that he is as much interested in the minutiae as he is in the larger questions of the afterlife, for he adds both detail and recapitulation to the *senchas* section dealing with the graves of prominent persons at the end of the text. He makes his additions at the top of the recto of the first of four leaves that he has intercalated at this point in the manuscript. Then, following the *explicit*, *Conid senchas na relec insin* (‘and that is the *senchas* of the graves’),<sup>20</sup> the Reviser has written the *Aided Echach meic Maireda*.<sup>21</sup>

*Aided Echach* recounts the story of Eochu mac Mairéda, son of a king of Munster. When his stepmother, daughter of Guaire of the Brúg, demands that he elope with her, his honor compels him to abandon his patrimony and seek land elsewhere. Eventually he settles in Ulster, where he is ultimately drowned with all his family, except one daughter and two sons, when Lough Neagh (*Loch nEchach*) erupts from the well of the settlement and floods the country. The principal interest of the story, despite its title, is not in the death of Eochu, but in the survival of that one daughter. Her name is LíBan, and her story is told in both prose and in twenty-seven quatrains attributed to Béolan mac Inli. After the eruption of Lough Neagh, she is transformed into a salmon and then into an otter, and thus survives in the water for three hundred years. Béolan, emissary of Comgall Bendachair to Pope Gregory, encounters her when he hears her singing under his currach. She is brought to Comgall and baptized with the Christian name of Muirgen, ‘sea-birth’. Soon thereafter she dies and is taken immediately to heaven.<sup>22</sup> According to *The Martyrology of Oengus*, she may be the Muirgen whose feast day is January 27.<sup>23</sup>

The theme of the violent death (*aided*) of legendary kings links H’s text of *Aided Echach meic Mairéda* to M’s *Aided Nath Í* at the most superficial level. In addition, a cursory reference to the making of Muirgen’s grave in *Aided Echach* recalls the catalogue of graves in *Aided Nath Í*. However, perhaps the strongest connection between the two tales is less immediately apparent. Both Nath Í and Eochu mac Mairéda die abrupt and catastrophic deaths, Nath Í struck by lightning and Eochu drowned in a sudden flood. Yet it may be that the Reviser, at least, was even more interested in the fate of Forménus, taken up to heaven in a ball of fire, and of LíBan, taken in death immediately after her baptism, having lived three hundred years underwater. Like *Fís*



*Adomnán, Scéla Laí Brátha*, and *Scéla na Esérge*, these are stories about the last things. They do not describe the afterlife, but they deal with the business of getting there.

Another theme in *Aided Echach meic Mairéda* may be pertinent to its proximity in LU to *Serglige Con Culainn*. Although *Aided Echach* ends with the edifying reception into heaven of the newly baptised LiBan, or Muirgen, it begins with woman trouble. It is the importunate demands of his stepmother, Ebliu, that force Eochu to abandon his patrimony in Munster and seek new lands on which to settle, and it is in that new place that the catastrophic flood sweeps him and his family away. On one of its several levels, the tale is concerned with the destructive and anti-social power of desire, especially a woman's desire.

Without taking into account the underlying centrality to *Aided Echach* of the dangers of desire, it would be difficult to account for the next text in the sequence of tales occupying pp. 27-50 of *Lebor na hUidre*, *Fotha Catha Cnucha* (The Cause of the Battle of Cnucha).<sup>24</sup> *Fotha Catha Cnucha* is a short Fenian tale. It recounts the conception and birth of Fionn and the death of his father Cumall in a battle precipitated by Cumall's abduction of the woman Muirne. This battle in turn gives rise to implacable enmity between Cumall's *fian* and that of Goll mac Morna. Moreover, Muirne's father seeks to punish her, driving her to seek refuge with Cumall's sister and send her infant son into fosterage deep in the forest. In the context of *fianaigecht*, *Fotha Catha Cnucha* serves to explain a number of underlying circumstances, particularly the enduring hostility of Fionn's people and the Clann Morna. *Lebor na hUidre* is by no means a collection of Fenian lore, however, so the importance of *Fotha Catha Cnucha* to that body of narrative would seem to have little to do with its presence in the manuscript. In

the context of *Lebor na hUidre*, the tale, with its north Leinster setting, is consistent with the regional interests that Tomás Ó Concheanainn observes throughout the manuscript.<sup>25</sup> But *Fotha Catha Cnucha* has no interest in the eschatological phenomena so prominent in *Fís Adomnáin*, *Scéla Laí Brátha*, and *Scéla na Esérge*, phenomena with echoes in the tales that immediately precede *Fotha Catha Cnucha* in the manuscript – *Aided Nath Í* and *Aided Echach meic Maireda*. Yet *Fotha Catha Cnucha* commences in the same column in which *Aided Echach* to a close, still in the hand of the Reviser, and on one of his four intercalated leaves. And *Fotha Catha Cnucha* immediately precedes *Serglige Con Culainn*. Any argument that there is thematic integrity in the sequence of tales in pages 27-54 of *Lebor na hUidre*, and that this coherence can help us to read *Serglige Con Culainn* more productively, must account for *Fotha Catha Cnucha*.

With *Fotha Catha Cnucha*, I would argue, the Reviser sets aside briefly his interest, and that of the main scribe, in eschatological questions. He explores instead the issue of sexual desire and its perils, a theme suggested by *Aided Echach meic Maireda*, which serves as a hinge joining the eschatological material with the stories of destructive eros.

It is in this context that the Reviser of LU appears to have commenced his work on *Serglige Con Culainn*. The *Serglige* commences on the recto of a new intercalated folio, at page 43a. There is no doubt, however, that it was already part of the manuscript. The Reviser's work on the text occupies two intercalated folios and part of the recto of a third (p. 47a), which he erased to make room for his own work; it then runs directly into the middle of the tale as it had been written by M. It has often been observed that the seam is a clumsily sewn one, so that the tale as we have it contains two

versions of a single episode. Whether or not this reduplication was deliberate, it is perfectly clear that the Reviser's project was to modify the text of *Serglige Con Culainn* as he found it in the manuscript, principally by the substitution of what he considered a more satisfactory version of the beginning.

Was *Aided Nath Í* the text that preceded *Serglige Con Culainn* before the Reviser set to work, or were there one or more intervening texts? Given the nineteenth-century disassembly of the manuscript and H's intercalations and extensive erasures, it is impossible to be sure. One or more folios might have intervened between pages 37-38, which contains *Aided Nath Í*, and pages 47-48, the first of the two folios on which M's work on *Serglige Con Culainn* is preserved. There is a strong possibility, however, that *Serglige Con Culainn* began at the conclusion of *Aided Nath Í*.

What purposes or preoccupations at this point guided the very purposeful scribe<sup>26</sup> who had interpolated *Scéla Laí Brátha*, *Scéla na Esérgi*, *Aided Echach Meic Mairéda* and *Fotha Catha Cnucha*—or at least revised versions of them—into the manuscript? And for that matter, what purposes or preoccupations had guided the original scribe, M, when he inscribed *Serglige Con Culainn* in a book in which he had already recorded *Fís Adomnán* and *Aided Nath Í*, as well as the material lost to the Reviser's self-confident erasures?

It was common practice for a medieval scribe, if he was not copying a single manuscript, to fill up his book by copying into it appropriate texts as they came to hand. Thus, if LU was indeed intended to be “a book of tales,”<sup>27</sup> the original scribes could have copied tales seriatim as sources presented themselves. If a scribe was working from a single exemplar, then the compiler of that source would have been the one who chose or

rejected texts that came to hand, solely on the basis of whether or not they belonged in his book, without regard to the precise position in the book that any given text ought to occupy. Thus, it may seem fanciful to imagine a scribe's writing program developing as his imagination led him from one text to another by certain themes and threads that were of particular interest to him. In the case of the Reviser of LU, however, we have no choice. We are impelled by his intercalations, erasures, and revisions to suppose that he, at least, must have had reasons for placing things where he did. Otherwise, why is it precisely here that he intercalates the leaves on which he wrote *Aided Echach Meic Maireda* and *Fotha Catha Cnucha*?

Before he rewrote the opening of *Serglige Con Culainn*, the Reviser had juxtaposed *Scéla Laí Brátha* and *Scéla na Esérgi*, explicitly Christian texts based on the New Testament and the Fathers, not only with *Fís Adomnán*--just as explicitly Christian but a bit more fanciful--but also with *Aided Nath Í*, with its episode of the assumption of Forménus into heaven, and *Aided Echach meic Maireda*, with its account of the preternatural survival and eventual baptism of LǐBan. For the presence in the manuscript of three of these-- *Scéla Laí Brátha*, *Scéla na Esérgi*, and *Aided Echach Meic Maireda*—he was, it seems, entirely responsible, and two of these interpolated texts belong squarely in the Christian, clerical category, while the other is an essentially secular tale with a Christian element in the episode of LǐBan's baptism. Moreover, judging from what we know of the contents of this part of the manuscript before the Reviser set to work on it, an interest in both Christian and pagan notions of the Otherworld was already present in this part of the original book, which brought *Serglige Con Culainn* together with *Aided Nath Í* and *Fís Adomnán*, the apparently non-Christian story with the odd, hybrid narrative of the

baptised mermaid and the imaginative account of Adomnán's vision of a Christian heaven and hell.

It appears that the Reviser's activity was, to a large extent, a matter of continuing by expansion the exploration of Otherworldly phenomena already undertaken by M or his source. The Reviser entered into dialogue with the book as he found it by inserting texts that seemed to him relevant to the topics at hand, texts that had something interesting to say on subjects that had been raised in the book as he found it. Indeed, it is precisely such a model of revision as conversation that perhaps best explains the interpolation of *Fotha Catha Cnucha*. For if *Aided Echach meic Maireda* offers some interesting views of a world that is not-quite-this-one, it also deals with the effects of inappropriate and unbridled desire, as do *Fotha Catha Cnucha* and, for that matter, *Serglige Con Culainn*.

In its immediate manuscript context, *Serglige Con Culainn* presents itself first and foremost as an account of the Otherworld, as it has traditionally been read. Yet it reflects, not a moment of monastic self-indulgence in guilty fascination with mysterious pagan notions, but rather an exploration of the same questions about the nature of the Otherworld and access thereto that inform *Fís Adomnán*, *Scéla Laí Brátha*, *Scéla na Esérge*, and, in somewhat different ways, *Aided Nath Í* and *Aided Echach meic Maireda*. At the same time, *Serglige Con Culainn* reflects too on the desire that can lead men into spiritual, as well as physical danger, and in this respect builds on the discourse of *Aided Echach Meic Maireda* and *Fotha Catha Cnucha*. *Lebor na hUidre* represents a conversation among its texts, a conversation between its texts and its scribes, and a conversation between the principal scribe and the Reviser. There is more than one topic at play in this exchange, as there often is in ordinary human and oral conversations, but as

is also the case in such quotidian exchanges, it is possible to follow a thread through the conversation.

It is in the context, then, of this part of *Lebor na hUidre* considered as a meaningful entity that I propose to examine *Serglige Con Culainn*. First, though, I hope to be permitted one further aside on the shape of the manuscript and the relationship of its texts to one another. One cannot help wondering what the Reviser thought of the connection between LíBan, daughter of Eochu mac Mairéda, the *muirgeilt* or ‘sea-lunatic’ as she is called in the text, the mermaid who survives to be saved by Comgall, and LíBan the emissary of Fand in *Serglige Con Culainn*.<sup>28</sup> The LíBan of *Serglige Con Culainn* shares with her namesake an aquatic setting. When Lóeg goes with her for the first time to the Otherworld—in the B Recension account of his journey—they cross a lake in a little bronze boat in order to reach Labraid’s home.<sup>29</sup> Labraid himself, however, arrives at the island in his chariot;<sup>30</sup> this detail helps to define the Otherworld by inversion of mundane expectations. When LíBan asks Cú Chulainn to go with her to the Otherworld in the A Recension, she tells him that Labraid resides over a clear lake.<sup>31</sup> And later, speaking to Emer, Cú Chulainn will describe Fand as someone who can “ride the waves across the ocean”.<sup>32</sup>

Not only their identical names and marine habitats would have linked the LíBan of *Aided Echach meic Mairéda* with the LíBan of *Serglige Con Culainn* in the Reviser’s mind, but also the fact that both are shape-shifters. LíBan the mermaid survives in the waters of Lough Neagh for three hundred years in part because she takes the form, first, of a salmon, and then, of an otter. The LíBan of *Serglige Con Culainn* is understood to be one of the two Otherworldly birds that appear, linked by a golden chain and singing, at

the beginning of the tale, initiating Cú Chulainn's *serglige* and his contact with the Otherworld (lines 59-70).

To recapitulate then, *Aided Echach meic Maireda* and *Serglige Con Culainn* share the theme of mortals in relationship with Otherworldly beings and of travel between the two worlds; more specifically, both associate the Otherworldly with water and with a shape-shifting woman called LíBan. *Aided Echach meic Maireda* locates these *topoi* within a framework of dynastic pseudo-history, while *Serglige Con Culainn* incorporates them within the Ulster Cycle. *Aided Echach meic Maireda* employs a chronology that spans the pre-Christian era into which LíBan is born and the age of the Christian saints, in which she is baptized and dies. *Serglige Con Culainn* situates its characters firmly within an explicitly pre-Christian world, but by virtue of references to the customs of the pagan past (lines 1-17) and of a colophon that speaks of *in chumachta demnach ria cretim* (line 845), it too constructs a dichotomy of pagan past and Christian present that invites comparison of their different ways of imagining the Otherworld. Moreover, the two tales are recorded in a section of LU that reflects a preoccupation with Otherworldly matters in six of seven texts—*Fís Adomnán*, *Scéla Laí Brátha*, *Scéla na Esérgi*, *Aided Nath Í*, *Aided Echach meic Maireda*, and *Serglige Con Culainn*. From this perspective the distinctive feature of *Serglige Con Culainn* is that its Otherworld is an exclusively pagan one, while its companion texts, with the exception of *Aided Echach meic Maireda*, concern themselves with the Christian heaven and hell. *Aided Echach meic Maireda* juxtaposes the pagan and the Christian.

### **The Christian Epistemology of *Serglige Con Culainn***

If the codicological context of *Serglige Con Culainn* is meaningful, we may reasonably suppose that its various accounts of apparitions, visitations, and dreams would have been read—by the compiler, scribes, and readers of LU, at any rate, if not by the original redactors of Recensions A and B of *Serglige Con Culainn*—in the light of medieval Christian thought about such matters.

Late antique and medieval writers on dreams and visions—Calcidius, Macrobius, Augustine, and Gregory the Great were the authorities most invoked in the Middle Ages—concern themselves with the same set of fundamental questions.<sup>33</sup> Are such experiences spiritual phenomena, or are they physical? If they are spiritual, do they originate within the self or without? If their origin is external, is their source angelic or demonic, reliable or delusory? Some of these concerns are readily apparent in *Serglige Con Culainn*. John Carey has already made a connection between the colophon, with its reference to the power of demons in the pre-Christian era,<sup>34</sup> and the seventh-century Hiberno-Latin *Liber de ordine creaturum* on the role of demons in visions and dreams.<sup>35</sup> But we can explore further the resonances of patristic writing in *Serglige Con Culainn*.

A dream inaugurates Cú Chulainn's relationship with the Otherworld in *Serglige Con Culainn*, a relationship he initiates by hunting a pair of magical birds. Having struck one of the birds, but failed to bring it down, Cú Chulainn sits down with his back against a stone, where he falls asleep and has a dream.<sup>36</sup> No explanation is offered of his sleepiness; it appears to serve no other purpose than to allow his dream into the story. It is striking, however, that Cú Chulainn rests his back against a stone in order to sleep, much as Jacob puts a stone under his head when he lies down to sleep “because the sun had set” and has a dream vision of a ladder linking heaven and earth (Genesis 28:11-13).



A learned clerical scribe or reader is not unlikely to have been reminded of Jacob as Cú Chulainn slips into the slumber in which his dream will come, and might have wondered whether the Ulster hero would experience a dream as authoritative as Jacob's, a dream in which God speaks directly to the patriarch.

Cú Chulainn's dream, however, so utterly unlike Jacob's, is in one sense merely a vehicle for the introduction of Otherworldly experience—it functions as do magical mists, snowy nights, and apparitions of Otherworldly visitors elsewhere in early Irish literary tradition. But dreams are very different from magical mists: dreams function as points of contact with the world of spirits in cultural traditions throughout the world and throughout history. There is nothing distinctively Irish or Celtic about the dream as site of a mortal's encounter with messengers from a supernatural or spiritual realm.

More particularly, dreams have from the outset played an important role in the Christian tradition, a role that they played in the Jewish tradition before that. God told Moses, Aaron and Miriam that, 'Should there be a prophet among you, in visions I will reveal myself to him, in dreams I will speak to him' (Numbers 12:6). Eliu told Job that 'By a dream in a vision by night, when deep sleep falleth upon men, and they are sleeping in their beds: Then [God] openeth the ears of men, and teaching instructeth them in what they are to learn' (Job 33: 15-16). God warned Abimelech in a dream against committing adultery with Sarah (Genesis 20:3-7), reassured Isaac (Genesis 26:24), and, as we have already seen, showed Jacob the ladder on which God's messengers moved between heaven and earth (Genesis 28:11-13). The Old Testament endorsed reverence even for enigmatic dreams in its accounts of Joseph's prophetic dreams and his ability to construe the dreams of Pharaoh (Genesis 37, 40, 41), and of Daniel's interpretation of

Nebuchadnezzar's dreams (Daniel 2,4 ). In the Christian gospels, angels appeared in dreams and spoke directly to Joseph (Matthew 1:20-24; 2:13, 19-22) and the Magi (Matthew 2:12).

The Bible is ambivalent about the value of dreams, however. As we have seen, God assures Aaron that "if there be among you a prophet of the Lord, I will appear to him in a vision, or I will speak to him in a dream" (Numbers 12:6). Yet Deuteronomy warns, "If there arise in the midst of these a prophet or one that saith he hath dreamed a dream, and he foretell a sign and a wonder, and that come to pass which he spoke, and he say to thee: Let us go and follow strange gods, which thou knowest not, and let us serve them, thou shalt not hear the words of that prophet or dreamer" (13:1-3), and Leviticus commands, "You shall not divine nor observe dreams" (19:26). Thus, a dream as a manifestation of Otherworldly phenomena held a particular resonance for an early medieval Christian reader familiar with the Old Testament. It was potentially a means of direct contact with God, but just as possibly a means by which a person might be deceived and led away from him. The fact that Cú Chulainn commences his Otherworldly adventures in a dream would likely have evoked all of the ambivalence, all of the sense of danger and impending transgression, combined with the longing for transcendent truth, associated with dreams in the Old Testament. It makes a difference to the story that it begins—at least in the version of Recension B recorded by the Reviser—with a dream. The fact of the dream in and of itself raises questions of the authority and import of the experience; it renders what follows potentially more than simply an adventure in the pre-Christian Otherworld.

When CúChulainn fell asleep, *ba holc a menma leis*, ‘he was in a bad state of mind,’ or ‘he was angry’ (line 72). An attentive clerical reader or listener would not have been surprised that troubled dreams should ensue, given Cú Chulainn’s troubled emotional state. All of the medieval dream authorities<sup>37</sup> agreed that dreams might originate outside the dreamer, the work of benevolent spirits or of demons, or might arise from within: not only the physical experiences and the thoughts, but also the emotions, of waking life, might precipitate and shape dreams. Macrobius, for example, in his influential *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, classifies as *insomnium* a dream that “may be caused by mental or physical distress, or anxiety about the future,” a dream in which “the patient experiences in dreams vexations similar to those that disturb him during the day” (I.iii.5; p. 88).<sup>38</sup> He calls such dreams *insomnia*, Macrobius informs us, “not because such dreams occur ‘in sleep’ . . . but because they are noteworthy only during their course and afterwards have no importance or meaning.” (I.iii.5; p.89) Such thinking, which is representative of medieval theory about dreamers with empty or overly full bellies, unwell dreamers, and dreamers in the grip of strong emotions, marks the dream of Cú Chulainn, with his *menma olc*, as unlikely to contain significant or valid revelation. Nevertheless, it was the contention of Gregory the Great that some dreams combined the preoccupations of the dreamer with either divine revelation or demonic delusion,<sup>39</sup> and this ambivalence creates a space in which Cú Chulainn’s dream remains of interest not only to the reader fascinated by the *áes side* but to the student of Christian mysteries as well.

In the dream, two women approach Cú Chulainn carrying whips; they beat him and mock him mercilessly. These women would seem to be, in some sense, the two

magical birds that escaped his sling and his spear. They are a projection of Cú Chulainn's anger at being reduced to a supplier of ladies' accessories and his frustrated desire to capture the final pair of birds for his wife. *[Is] holc a menma leis* because he feels shamed on both counts. It is not surprising that in his dream, the birds that got away return as women to punish him for his arrogance and to humiliate him for his failure as a hunter. This reading of the episode offers a way to understand it in terms of the effect on dreams of the "vexations" of the day, as Macrobius would have it. It also situates the opening of the dream securely within the frame of the Ulster Cycle's heroic ethos.

However, the Reviser and his readers may have framed it differently. Christian tradition was by no means ignorant of the notion of punishment for transgression being administered in dreams. Tertullian, for example, in *De virginibus velandis*, wrote of an angel who appeared in a dream to strike a girl who wore a veil too short for modesty, as Tertullian construed it.<sup>40</sup> And centuries later in Iona, Adomnán recounts the story of a punitive dream in his *Vita Columbae*. Columba

saw one night in a mental trance an angel of the Lord sent to him. He had in his hand a glass book of the ordination of kings, which St. Columba received from him, and which at the angel's bidding he began to read. In the book the command was given him that he should ordain Áedán as king, which St. Columba refused to do because he held Áedán's brother Éoganán in higher regard. Whereupon the angel reached out and struck the saint with a whip, the scar from which remained with him for the rest of his life. Then the angel addressed him sternly: 'Know then as a certain truth, I am sent to you by God with the glass book in order that you should ordain Áedán to the kingship according to the words you have read in it. But if you refuse to obey this command, I shall strike you again.' (iii.5)<sup>41</sup>

It takes two repeat visits, but the angel at last persuades Columba to abide by the will of God and consecrate Áedán mac Gábrain king of Dalriada.

More particularly, the beating administered to Cú Chulainn in his dream echoes oddly a passage in *Fís Adomnán*, the first text in LU's exploration of Otherworldly adventures. There, the gates to the first and second heavens are guarded by the archangels Michael and Uriel respectively, and each is accompanied by two virgins (*dí óig*).<sup>42</sup> The first pair carry iron rods with which "to scourge and beat the sinners; so that it is there that sinners encounter the first reproof and the first suffering on the path which they tread"; the two who accompany Uriel bear "fiery whips in their hands; with these they scourge the faces and the eyes of the sons of death."<sup>43</sup> We do not know whether the Reviser was familiar with Adomnán's *Vita Columbae* or any of the patristic texts in which punitive dreams occur. Surely, though, the Reviser, inscribing the account of Cú Chulainn's dream, must have been reminded by the two fairy women of the two pairs of virgins described in *Fís Adomnán* as it had been copied into the manuscript by M.

*Fís Adomnán* is, as its title announces, a vision. We are told what Adomnán saw "when his soul parted from his body on the feast of John the Baptist," (p. 264) and what he later "preached at the great assembly of the men of Ireland" (p. 273). Although he observes the administration of punitive blows with rods and scourges, Adomnán does not experience them. In this respect, Cú Chulainn's dream has more in common with Columba's dream in the *Vita Columbae* than with the *Fís Adomnán*. Even so, the comparison of the whipping in *Serglige Con Culainn* with that in the *Fís Adomnán* would have been suggestive for the thoughtful clerical reader. In *Fís Adomnán*, the harsh

ministrations of the virgins serve to purify virtuous but imperfect souls who are on their way to heaven. Cú Chulainn's dream also initiates him into an Otherworld, but harms, rather than helping him. He is rendered unable to speak and compelled to resort to *serglige*. By contrast with what Adomnán learned about heavenly practices, and was able to bring back to preach "in assemblies and gatherings of laity and clergy" (p. 273), Cú Chulainn's vision is unproductive, his suffering meaningless. When he awakens, he is unable to speak for a year, except to insist that he be carried to An Tête Bricc.<sup>44</sup> Adomnán's soul is caught up into ecstasy, and once he has experienced the glories of heaven, he "thought to linger and remain in that country" (p. 273). Nevertheless, he is required by his angel to return to the world and use what he has seen in his teaching. His story, situated in proximity to *Serglige Con Culainn*, invites comparison with that of the Ulster hero, who is also in a sense carried into the Otherworld in his initial dream, and who is later lured back to it.

Another level on which *Serglige Con Culainn* would have invited comparison, for a medieval clerical reader, with *Fís Adomnán* and the other eschatological texts that precede it in LU is that of the questions that they raise about the nature of Otherworld experience. The central epistemological problem posed by such experience was epitomized in St. Paul's assertion that "I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know—God knows. And I know that this man—whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows—was caught up to paradise" (2 Corinthians 12:2-4). Augustine opens the

twelfth book of his *De Genesi ad litteram* with rumination on Paul's uncertainty as to whether he was "in the body" or "out of the body" when he had his vision of heaven. Augustine's discussion became a medieval *locus classicus* for the discussion of dreams, ecstasies and visions, and his reflections provide a useful guide to some of the ways in which medieval scholars might have read texts that dealt with such experience.<sup>45</sup> He observes at the outset that

if it is impossible for the spirit to be carried without the body to corporeal places or for the body to be carried to spiritual places, this very doubt of his virtually forces us to the conclusion that the region to which he was carried . . . was such that it was impossible to discern clearly whether it was corporeal or spiritual (XII.1.2, p. 179).

It is explicit in *Fís Adomnán* that Adomnán's "soul departed from his body on the feast of John the Baptist, and was taken to heaven with the angels of heaven" (p. 264). Other LU texts, though, admit more uncertainty about the relationship of the embodied and the disembodied. *Scéla na Esérgei*, for instance, demonstrates an interest in the conundrum posed by the dichotomy of body and spirit and the centrality of both to Christianity. After discussing the age of bodies at the resurrection, the restoration of fragmented and deformed bodies, the role of gender in the resurrected body, and related matters, the homily grapples with the question of the corporeality of the risen body. The author is confident that it will be "dense", i.e., substantial and corporeal, rather than "like air".<sup>46</sup> But he is troubled by Paul's statement that "It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body" (1 Cor 15: 44). He concludes that Paul refers to the symmetry, beauty and radiance of resurrected bodies, rather than to their substance.<sup>47</sup>

In the context of these texts, questions might well arise for readers of *Serglige Con Culainn* about the nature of the Otherworldly bodies – Óengus mac Áeda Abrat, LíBan, Fand and Manannán – that intrude into the world of the Ulster Cycle, and about Cú Chulainn's own status when he is dreaming and when he journeys to the Otherworld. Are they in the body or out of the body?

Laeg's and, later, Cú Chulainn's journeys into the Otherworld seem to be fairly straightforward undertakings. Cú Chulainn is able to take his chariot with him to Mag Mell.<sup>48</sup> But the accounts of the journeys elide the details. We are certain only of the fact that LíBan accompanies Laeg in both accounts of his journey to Mag Mell and that Cú Chulainn as well travels there in her company.<sup>49</sup> She functions much like the angel who brings Adomnán to heaven and to hell, as a kind of psychopomp. The visitations to this world of Óengus, LíBan, Fand and Manannán too are mysterious; the visitors are simply, suddenly there. Óengus's visit, for example, is described this: "A man came to them in the house and seated himself at the front of the chamber where Cú Chulainn was . . . and then he left them and it was unknown whence he had come or where he went."<sup>50</sup> That the Otherworldly visitors to Ulster may be spectral, rather than corporeal, is suggested at the end of the tale, when none of the mortals is able to see Manannán.<sup>51</sup>

The imprecision of the accounts of these incursions and expeditions renders their nature potentially uncertain, and in that regard they are not unlike other visionary experiences described in late antique and medieval texts, including Paul's. For Augustine in the *De Genesi*, the ambiguity arises from the



fact that “corporeal” (*corporale*) and “spiritual” (*spirituale*) vision have a great deal in common. Corporeal vision is, quite simply, the faculty that perceives with the eye. Spiritual vision is what we might call the imagination, the faculty that draws either upon that which is “perceived through the body and presented to the senses of the body” –in other words, the information presented to it by corporeal vision—or on images of absent bodies and “whatever is not a body, and yet is something” (XII.7.16, p. 186). Corporeal vision is not so much distinct from as it is subsidiary to spiritual vision: “Corporeal vision . . . does not oversee any operations of the other two kinds of vision; rather the object perceived by it is announced to the spiritual vision, which acts as an overseer” (XII.11.22, p. 191). Since images of what is remembered but absent, images produced by a spiritual force, and images of objects physically present to the senses are all processed by the spiritual vision, there is considerable room for ambiguity about what is corporeally present and what is not:

For it is not the body that perceives, but the soul by means of the body; and the soul uses the body as a sort of messenger in order to form within itself the object that is called to its attention from the outside world. Hence corporeal vision cannot take place unless there is a concomitant spiritual vision; but no distinction is made between the two until the bodily sensation has passed and the object perceived by means of the body is found in the spirit. On the other hand, there can be spiritual vision without corporeal vision, namely, when the likenesses of absent bodies appear in the spirit, and when many such images are fashioned by the free activity of the soul or are presented to it in spite of itself. (XII.24.51, p. 214)

It may sometimes be that by an excessive application of thought, or by the influence of some disorder (as happens to those who are delirious with fever), or by the agency of some other spirit, whether good or evil, the images of bodies are produced in the spirit just as if bodies were present to the senses of the body, although the attention of the soul may meanwhile remain alert even in the bodily senses. In this case, images of bodies are

seen appearing in the spirit, and real bodies are perceived through the eyes. The result is that at the same time one man who is present will be seen with the eyes and another who is absent will be seen in the spirit as if with the eyes. . . . But when the attention of the mind is completely carried off and turned away from the senses of the body, then there is rather the state called ecstasy. Then any bodies that are present are not seen at all, though the eyes may be wide open; and no sounds at all are heard. The whole soul is intent upon images of bodies present to spiritual vision . . . without benefit of bodily images” (XII.25, pp. 193-4)

There is certainly no direct evidence that the Reviser of LU was familiar with the *De Genesi ad litteram*, but we do know that it was well represented in medieval manuscripts of British and Irish provenance.<sup>52</sup> It has been argued, furthermore, that the seventh-century *De mirabilibus Sacrae Scripturae* of Augustinus Hibernicus, the “Irish (pseudo-) Augustine, reflects a familiarity with the *De Genesi*. In any case, *Scéla na Esérge*, with its fascination with the substance of resurrected bodies, attests the interest of Irish scholars and of the Reviser of LU in questions of perception and physicality, and familiarity with the kind of thinking on those matters that is to be found in Augustine’s writings.<sup>53</sup> In the context of the eschatological texts that precede it in LU, the status of both dream images and waking visitations in *Serglige Con Culainn* would have been in question for learned readers.

That the incontestably incorporeal images of the dream introduce this topic in *Serglige Con Culainn* foregrounds it, shaping the reader’s perspective on the later, apparently corporeal, visitations. The notion of *visio spirituale*, spiritual vision, unites Cú Chulainn’s dream experience with his waking experience of the birds flying over the lake, Óengus’s appearance at Cú Chulainn’s bedside, LíBan’s visits to Cú Chulainn and Lóeg’s to Mag Mell, and even Fand’s visit to this world. In their textual representation, the events that take place within Cú Chulainn’s dream are as real as are the visitations to

this world of Óengus, Lí Ban, Fand, and Manannán, and the journeys to the Otherworld of Lóeg and CúChulainn. Dream images and apparitions have equal claim on our credibility, and the psychology adumbrated in the twelfth book of the *De Genesi* provides a very useful perspective from which to view both kinds of commerce with the Otherworld in *Serglige Con Culainn*.

Intellectual vision is the third kind of vision for Augustine in the triad of *visio corporale*, *visio spirituale*, and *visio intellectuale* (XII.7.16, p. 186). This faculty, the highest of the three, permits us “to see an object not in an image, but in itself, yet not through the body” (XII.6.15, p. 185); it is the faculty in which abstraction and judgment exercise themselves. Intellectual vision is indifferent to the physicality or immateriality of what is seen; it understands experience in terms of a different truth:

There is no deception in intellectual vision; for either a person does not understand, and this is the case of one who judges something to be other than it is, or he does understand, and then his vision is necessarily true. The eyes are helpless when they see a body which resembles another body and which they cannot distinguish from the other; and the attention of the mind is helpless when in the spirit there is produced a likeness of a body which it cannot distinguish from the body itself. But the intellect is employed to seek out the meaning that these things have or the useful lessons they teach; and either it finds its object and enjoys the fruits of its search, or it fails to find it and continues to reflect (XII.14.29, p. 197).

It does not really matter, in other words, whether the bodies that Adomnán sees in heaven and hell are presented first to his corporeal vision or directly to his spiritual vision. He is able to recognize the heaven and hell that they inhabit as “true”, and that truth is validated by the presence of the angel who guides him on his journey: “Spiritual vision needs intellectual vision if a judgment is to be made upon its contents, but intellectual vision does not need spiritual, which is of a lower order” (*De Genesi ad litteram*

XII.24.51, p. 214).<sup>54</sup> Cú Chulainn, on the other hand, seems to be sadly deficient in intellectual vision in this tale, unable as he is to resist the charms of his Otherworld mistress even at the cost of his stable and honourable marriage in the human world. The one exception to the failure of intellectual vision on Cú Chulainn's part is his *briathartheosc*.

Most writers on *Serglige ConCulainn* have dismissed as an interpolation in *Serglige Con Culainn* the episode of the *tarbhfhes* that is conducted to identify the next king of Tara, the quest for the man with the red stripes round his body – Lugaid Réoderg – and Cú Chulainn's emergence from his stupor to deliver gnomic advice to his fosterling (lines 233-302). It was generally regarded as something that had no place in the story except as a “buffer” between the overlapping bits of Recensions A and B<sup>55</sup> until Tomás Ó Cathasaigh and John Carey, in their contributions to *Ulidia I*, suggested new ways of thinking about its relationship to the rest of the tale.<sup>56</sup> Carey pointed out that a rare term for a dream or vision, *res*, is employed to describe both the ritual dreaming of the *tarbhfhes* and Cú Chulainn's vision trance at the opening of the tale.<sup>57</sup> This led him to propose that the *tarbhfhes* episode properly belongs to Recension B, the source employed by the Reviser in his interpolations and substitutions. Whether or not that is so, it was the Reviser who added it to the tale, and it is a vignette that accords well with the interest he demonstrates generally in connections with a world beyond this one.

The divinatory dream of the *tarbhfhes*, which is self-evidently revelatory, rather than illusory, serves as a lens through which we can focus more clearly on the nature of Cú Chulainn's dream. The *tarbhfhes* is represented as an aspect of pagan custom that needs to be explained: *Is amlaid dognithe in tarbfes sin*, “it is thus that this *tarbhfhes*

used to be performed” (line 246). Even though the custom of *tarbhfhēs* belongs to the pagan past, the induced dream in this case is a “true” dream in that it shows an image of Lugaid Réoderg at the bedside of a sick man in Emain Macha, and that proves to be exactly where Lugaid is. It would not necessarily have scandalised a Christian audience that a true dream of this sort had been at one time possible. Augustine had advised that

Even those possessed by a devil occasionally speak the truth about objects beyond the reach of their senses . . . [Sometimes] the evil spirit acts in a seemingly peaceful manner and, without tormenting the body, possesses a man’s spirit and says what he is able, sometimes even speaking the truth and disclosing useful knowledge of the future (de Genesi ad litteram XII.13.28, p. 196).

The description of such a true dream within the context of the kind of divinatory rite that the Church condemned complicates further the issue of visions and dreams introduced into the manuscript with *Fís Adomnán*. It is possible for pagans to dream true dreams, even without the warranting presence of an angel. Likewise, it is possible for a pagan, indeed for Cú Chulainn himself, deluded as he is through most of the *Serglige*, to exercise his intellectual vision, speaking the truths of his *briathartheosc* without recourse to images either corporeal or imaginative.

There is nothing inherently inconsistent with Christian reflection on these matters in the fact that Cú Chulainn has the set of Otherworldly experiences that he does; what shows him to be deluded, in a way that might be expected of someone who lived *ria cretim*, before the faith, is his patent failure to exercise his intellectual vision and judgment in the main narrative, his inability to reject Fand and restore the social order by reconciliation with Emer until the very end of the tale. *Cáid cech n-écmais, is faill cech n-aichnid, co festar cach n-éolas*, Emer tells him, “everything absent is fair, while everything familiar is negligible, as any wise one knows” (lines 721-22).

From this perspective, there is no inconsistency between the colophon and what precedes it. The colophon represents an enlightened commentary on the tale, a judgment, as Tomás Ó Cathasaigh has pointed out, that what the Ulstermen of the pre-Christian era called the *síde* 7 *áes síde* (line 849) were in fact demons, that is to say, malevolent spirits able to impose images upon the spiritual vision of human persons that were indistinguishable from those engendered by corporeal vision. Sometimes these spirits would speak the truth, as they clearly did in the case of the *tarbhfhés*, but all too often they sought to lead people astray thereby. Distinction of valid, divinely inspired dreams and visions from those imposed by demons is no easy task, but it is a task more important than the distinction of material and substantial reality from insubstantial images. To reiterate what Augustine wrote,

Even those possessed by a devil occasionally speak the truth about objects beyond the reach of their senses at the time . . . But when a good spirit seizes or ravishes the spirit of a man to direct it to an extraordinary vision, there can be no doubt that the images are signs of other things which it is useful to know, for this is a gift of God. The discernment of these experiences is certainly a most difficult task when the evil spirit acts in a seemingly peaceful manner and, without tormenting the body, possesses a man's spirit and says what he is able . . . in order that, once having gained his victim's confidence in matters that are manifestly good, he may then lure his victim into his snares. This spirit, so far as I know, cannot be recognized except by that gift mentioned by St. Paul, where he speaks of different gifts of God: “. . . to another the distinguishing of spirits” (*De Genesi ad litteram* XII.13.28, p. 196)

*Serglige ConCulainn* concludes the exploration in *Lebor na Huidre* of Otherworldly experiences that opens with *Fís Admonán*. The six texts on this topic in the revised LU by no means constitute a single or syllogistical disquisition on the nature of the Otherworld, pagan and Christian, and our ways of knowing it, but all of them reflect a fascination with the Otherworld and the ways in which living human persons are

able to experience it. *Serglige Con Culainn* is not an answer to *Fís Adomnán*, nor does *Fís Adomnán* tell us what *Serglige Con Culainn* means. But their collocation affords an interesting glimpse into the milieu in which medieval Irish vernacular manuscripts were made and remade. It offers no insight into the composition of the tales, or their inherent meaning, but it does suggest that the reading habits of medieval Irish scribes were as ruminative when they worked on vernacular manuscripts as they were when they read their Psalters. Early in his distinguished publishing career, our honorand described the habit of oral storytellers not only of responding to one another's stories with tales from their own repertoires that their colleagues' performances evoked, but of correcting one another's versions, and, when performances were recorded by collectors, their own as well. He invited us to see the work of the scribes of Lebor na hUidre, and particularly that of the Reviser, in that light. These scribes, he argued, "take an attitude toward their texts which expresses itself as a desire for completeness."<sup>58</sup> I would go a step further and suggest that the Reviser not only sought "completeness" and correctness, but that he engaged actively in a dialogue with the texts that he encountered in Lebor na hUidre, texts that, whether they belonged to a Christian or an older heroic tradition, fed his reflection on the subjects of heaven and hell and the dreams and visions that may lead men to one or the other. That visions of the nature of heaven and hell should have replaced the potentially destructive experience of the *side ria cretim* would perhaps have seemed only natural to the monastic compilers of LU, who might well have known what Gregory the Great said about dreams and visions in the fourth book of his *Dialogues*:

As the present world approaches its end, the world of eternity looms nearer, manifesting itself by ever clearer signs. . . . In the transitional hour before sunrise, when the night comes to an end and the new day is about to begin, darkness is somehow blended with light until the remaining

shadows of the night are perfectly absorbed into the brightness of the coming day. In this way the end of the world merges with the beginnings of eternal life. Earth's remaining shadows begin to fade as the beams of spiritual light filter through them. We can therefore discern many truths about the future life, but we see them still imperfectly, because the light in which we see is still dim and pale, like the light of the sun in the early hours of the day just before dawn.<sup>59</sup>



<sup>1</sup> As well as for its vivid evocation of a lovesick mistress and of an angry and disgusted wife, especially since these were drawn to our closer attention by Joanne Findon's *A Woman's Words*. As Findon observes, "the text presents both Emer and her Otherworld rival, Fand, as speaking subjects who articulate their desires clearly and forcefully. Few other medieval texts contain such a vivid portrayal of a female perspective on the nature of love. And few others depict a woman's verbal intervention as altering the narrative trajectory so decisively" (Joanne Findon, *A Woman's Words: Emer and Female Speech in the Ulster Cycle*, Toronto, 1997), p. 127.

This essay had its origin in a paper read to the XIth International Congress of Celtic Studies at Cork in 1999. I am grateful to all of those who made comments on that occasion, and particularly to Thomas Charles-Edwards, Thomas Owen Clancy, and Joanne Findon.

<sup>2</sup> Myles Dillon opens the introduction to his edition of the text with the observation that "[t]he story of CúChulainn's visit to the Otherworld has a special claim on our attention, because if its long descriptions of the Irish Elysium, here called Mag Mell 'the Plain of Delights'" (*Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XIV, Dublin, 1953, p. ix); Gerard Murphy expressed a similar view in *Saga and Myth in Ancient Ireland*: "Many tales . . . have a peculiar beauty by reason of the descriptions contained in them of 'the land where there is nought but truth, where there is neither age, nor decay, nor gloom, nor sadness, nor envy, nor jealousy, nor hate nor pride'. Though essentially mythological, they may be loosely connected with any cycle by reason of their human hero. Thus *Seirglige Con Culainn ocus Óenét Emire* . . . might, by reason of the presence in it of CúChulainn, be classified with the Heroic tales" (Dublin, 1961, p. 25; rpt. in Eleanor Knott and Gerard Murphy, *Early Irish Literature*, New York, 1966, pp. 95-142; quotation at p. 113). James Carney read *Serglige Con Culainn* as a "mechanical" rewriting of *Immram Brain* which "belongs to that period when Irish Saga writers were merely borrowing the incidents of earlier material and arranging them in meaningless if picturesque patterns. There is no hint of a deeper level of thought. . . ." ("The External Element in Irish Saga," in *Studies in Irish Literature and History*, Dublin, 1979, pp. 276-323, at p. 292). John Carey, in his astute study of "The Uses of Tradition in *Serglige Con Culainn*" describes the poems in the A recension as "perhaps the most celebrated Otherworld descriptions in the literature" other than "the poems in *Immram Brain* and Midir's invitation 'A Bé Fhind, in rega limm' in *Tochmarc Étaíne*" (in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. J.P. Mallory and Gerard Stockman, Belfast, 1994, pp. 77-84, at p. 82).

<sup>3</sup> *Conid taibsiu aidmillti do Choin Chulaind la háes sidi sin. Ar ba mór in chumachta demnach ria cretim, 7 ba hé a méit co cathaigtis co corptha na demna frisna doinib 7 co taisféntais aibniusa 7 díamairi dóib, amal no betis co marthanach. Is amlaid no creteá dóib. Conid frisna taidbsib sin atberat na hanéolaig side 7 áes side* (So that is the destructive vision shown to Cú Chulainn by the people of the *side*. For demonic power was great before the Faith, and such was its extent that demons would battle bodily with humans, and would show them delights and secrets, as if they were lasting. It is thus that they were believed in. And the ignorant call those visions *side* and *áes side*.) Myles Dillon, ed., *Serglige Con Culainn*, Mediaeval and Modern Irish Series XIV, Dublin, 1953, ¶ 49, lines 844-49. All quotations from *Serglige Con Culainn* are from this text.

<sup>4</sup> Carey, p. 83.

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the debate, see Tomás Ó Concheanainn, "Leabhar na hUídhre: Further Textual Associations," *Éigse* 30 (1997), 27-91, at 57.

<sup>6</sup> Although Tomás Ó Concheanainn has questioned the identification of the two *probationes pennae* in LU, the basis upon which Mael Muire was thought to have been the principal scribe, with the hand of that principal scribe. *Ibid.*, 67. He has suggested that Mael Muire was the Reviser, rather than the principal scribe of the manuscript, and that Mael Muire's death at Clonmacnoise in 1106, as recorded in the Annals, implies that the Reviser undertook his work much sooner after the principal scribe completed his own than had previously been supposed. His views on the manuscript and its scribes are developed in a series of articles published in *Éigse* over the course of a quarter century: "The Reviser of Leabhar na hUídhre," *Éigse* 15 (1973-4), 277-8; "'Aided Nath Í' and the Scribes of Leabhar na hUídhre," *Éigse* 16 (1975), 147-62; "LL and the Date of the Reviser of LU," *Éigse* 20 (1984), 212-25; "Textual and Historical Associations of Leabhar na hUídhre," *Éigse* 29 (1996), 65-120; "Leabhar na hUídhre: Further Textual Associations," *Éigse* 30 (1997), 27-91.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion of the foliation and pagination of LU, see R.I. Best and Osborn Bergin, eds., *Lebor na hUidre: Book of the Dun Cow* (Dublin, 1929), pp. xiii, xviii-xxiii. This edition is available on line in the Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G301900/index.html>. See also the description of the manuscript at Irish Script on Screen, <http://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html>. Line references to LU throughout this essay refer to both the print and the online editions.

<sup>8</sup> Best and Bergin, p. xiii

<sup>9</sup> Gearóid Mac Eoin, "The Interpolator H in Lebor na hUidre," in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. J.P. Mallory and G. Stockman (Belfast, 1994), pp. 39-46, at 39. For further discussion of the provenance and purpose of the manuscript, see Tomás Ó Concheanainn, "Textual and Historical Associations of Leabhar na hUidhre," *Eigse* 29 (1996), 65-120.

<sup>10</sup> Best and Bergin, xiii. The same pagination is used in the digital images of the manuscript at Irish Script on Screen <http://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html>. The text is at lines 3321-4039, pp. 104-26 of the Best and Bergin edition of LU. All subsequent references to LU lines numbers are to this edition.

<sup>11</sup> Although both Whitley Stokes and David Dumville have claimed that there is a folio missing between p. 32 and 33, this argument does not impinge upon my own analysis of the sequence of texts in pp. 27-54. Dumville maintains that this folio would have contained not an additional text, but the conclusion of *Scéla Láí Brátha*. Whitley Stokes, "The Tidings of Doomsday," *Révue Celtique* 4 (1879-80), 245-57, at 253; David N. Dumville, "Scéla Láí Brátha and the Collation of Leabhar na hUidhre," *Éigse* 16 (1975/6), 24-8.

<sup>12</sup> This is made clear in the description of the manuscript at <http://www.isos.dias.ie/english/index.html>.

<sup>13</sup> *Díaro escomlá a anim asa churp hi feil Iohain Baptist 7 dia rucad dochum richid co n-ainglib nimi 7 iffrind cona dáecorshúag*. LU lines 1963-65. Ernst Windisch, ed. "Fís Adamnáin," in *Irische Texte mit Wörterbuch* (Leipzig, 1880), pp. 165-96, at p. 172; see also Whitley Stokes, ed., *Fís Adamnáin* (Simla, 1870). On *Fís Adamnáin* and its sources, see C.S. Boswell, *An Irish Precursor of Dante* (London, 1908); St. John D. Seymour, "The Vision of Adamnán," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 37, Section C (1924-27), 304-12, and *Irish Visions of the Other-World* (London, 1930); David Dumville, "Towards an Interpretation of Fís Adamnán," *Studia Celtica* 12/13 (1977-78), 62-77; Jane Stevenson, "Ascent through the Heavens, from Egypt to Ireland," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 5 (1983), 21-35.

<sup>14</sup> R.I. Best in "Notes on the Script of Lebor na hUidhre," *Ériu* 6 (1912), 161-74, at 165.

<sup>15</sup> *Matha mac Alphin . . . ro lesaig na scéla so lathi bratha mar ro chúala a bélaib a mágistrech* (LU 2313-15). *Scéla Láí Brátha* was edited by Whitley Stokes, "The Tidings of Doomsday," *Révue Celtique* 4 (1879-80), 245-57, and his edition is available digitally in the CELT (Corpus of Electronic Texts) at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G207000/index.html>

<sup>16</sup> Whitley Stokes, ed., "The Tidings of the Resurrection," *Révue Celtique* 25 (1904), 232-59. The edition is available digitally in CELT at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G207001/index.html>. Augustine is cited in § 12, p. 240: *Érnid Augustin in fer naem in cesta-sin*; Gregory in § 19, p. 244: *Ro foruáslig immorro Gregoir naem in cetfaid-sin & ros-fhathgé*.

<sup>17</sup> As was observed by R.I. Best in "Notes on the Script of Lebor na hUidhre," 172.

<sup>18</sup> Vlad Bănăţeanu, ed., "Die Legende von König Dathi," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 18 (1930), 160-88.

<sup>19</sup> Máire West, "Leabhar na hUidhre's Position in the Manuscript History of *Togail Bruidne Da Derga* and *Orgain Bruidne Uí Dergae*," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 20 (1990), 61-98, at 84.

<sup>20</sup> *Senchas na relec* is also the title given by M to a text written by him with interpolations by H on pages 50b-52a, immediately following the *Serglige Con Culainn*.

<sup>21</sup> Standish H. O'Grady, ed., trans., "Aided Echach maic Mairieda in so", in *Silva Gadelica* (London, 1892), vol. 1, pp. 233-7; "This is the Death of Eochaid Son of Mairid," vol. 2, pp. 265-9.

<sup>22</sup> *A baisted 7 a tocht dochum nimi fo chétoir*, LU lines 3127-3128.

<sup>23</sup> Whitley Stokes, ed., *The Martyrology of Oengus the Culdee* (London, 1905; rpt. Dublin, 1984), pp. 38, 52-55.

<sup>24</sup> LU lines 3135-3219; trans. Joseph F. Nagy, *The Wisdom of the Outlaw* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1985), Appendix 1, § 2, pp. 218-21.

<sup>25</sup> Ó Concheanainn, "Textual and Historical Associations," 67.

<sup>26</sup> Best and Bergin describe him as having "set to work with great determination and, it must be said, with no small interest in the texts" (p. xvi).

<sup>27</sup> MacEoin, p. 39.

<sup>28</sup> I would not argue that the Reviser understood the two figures called LíBan to be the same person, but this is not impossible. The first reference to the LíBan of *Serglige Con Culainn* occurs in his hand, in Óengus's address in verse to the Ulstermen when he appears at CúChulainn's bedside:

*Asbert LíBan I Maig Crúaich  
bís for deis Labrada Lúath  
'robad chridiscél la Faind  
coibligi fri Con Culaind'* (lines 103-106)

(Said LíBan, who is on Labraid Luath's right hand in Mag Crúaich,  
'It would be Fand's heart's delight to lie with CúChulainn'.)

This quatrain follows the opening one, which concludes with the following couplet:

*not ícfitis, diamtis lat ingena Áeda Abrat* (lines 101-102)  
(The daughters of Aed Abrat would heal you if they were with you.)

Accordingly, LíBan has, not unreasonably, generally been taken to be one of these daughters. In the final quatrain, Óengus promises

*domsficfe úaimse LiBan, a ChuChulaind cot galar.* (lines 117-118)  
(I will send you LíBan for your illness, O CúChulainn,)

and the conventional repetition of the first quatrain as closure would have reiterated the connection of healing with "the daughters of Aed Abrat," reinforcing the notion that LíBan is one of these.

Again, when CúChulainn himself arrives in the Otherworld, Fand claims that,  
*is iat dorat sund hi fat ingena Áeda Abrat* (lines 640-641)

('Those who have brought him here this long way are the daughters of Aed Abrat.')

Since it is LíBan who has first extended Fand's invitation to CúChulainn, although she does not actually conduct him to the Otherworld once he decides to make the journey—it is Lóeg who guides him—this couplet too suggests that LíBan is a daughter of Áed Abrat, and therefore not the daughter of Ecohu mac Maireda, as is LíBan the mermaid

Yet in the prose narration of Lóeg's second journey to the Otherworld—the A recension version of his journey—it is said that he travelled with LíBan to the place where Áed Abrat was, with his daughters. This suggests that she is perhaps not one of them. Fand alone is explicitly said to be the daughter of Áed Abrat (lines 171-72) and thus sister to Óengus mac Áeda Abrat (line 119). LíBan identifies herself only as the wife of Labraid Luathlám (lines 133-34).

I am not sure that there is any absolute difference between Recensions A and B, or between the work of M and that of H on this point. It is in fact the Reviser who is responsible for all of the verse passages that seem to imply that LíBan is a daughter of Áed Abrat, and M who wrote the prose account of Lóeg's arrival at the home of Áed Abrat and his daughters. However, it was the Reviser who identified Fand and Óengus as the children of Áed Abrat, and LíBan only as the wife of Labraid. It seems to me that neither textual tradition is quite clear on this point, and that the reviser might well have imagined LíBan to be, or at least wondered whether she was, the same LíBan who had survived in an underwater Otherworld after the eruption of Lough Neagh.

<sup>29</sup> *Co n-accatar in luingine crédume forsind loch ara cind. Tiagait iarom isin lunga ⁊ tiagait isin n-insi ⁊ lotar do dorus tige co n-accatar in fer chucu* (lines 151-54).

<sup>30</sup> *In tan mbátar and iarom co cúalatar culgaire carpat Labrada dund insi* (lines 175-76).

<sup>31</sup> *Atá Labraid for lind glan* (line 421)

<sup>32</sup> *Ilchrothach ind ingen sin do thonnaib dar leraib lánmóraib* (lines 713-14).

<sup>33</sup> The principal texts are Calcidius, *Timaeus a Calcidio translatus commentarioque*, ed. J. H. Waszink (London, 1975), especially chapters 249-55; Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John H. Taylor, Ancient Christian Writers 41-2 (New York, 1982), Book XII; Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. William H. Stahl (New York, 1952); Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, The Fathers of the Church 39 (Washington, 1959), Book IV; Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*, ed. Pierre Cazier (Turnholt, 1998)

<sup>34</sup> *Ar ba mór in chumachta demnach ria cretim ⁊ ba hé a méit co cathaigtis co corptha na demna frisna doínib ⁊ co taisféntais aibniusa ⁊ díamairi dóib, amal no betis co marthanach* (lines 845-47)

<sup>35</sup> Carey, p. 79.

<sup>36</sup> *Dotháet Cú Chulaind iar sin co tard a druim frisin liic ⁊ ba holc a menma leis ⁊ dofuít cotlud fair* (lines 71-2).

<sup>37</sup> see above, n. 33.

<sup>38</sup> References are to Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, ed. and trans. William H. Stahl (New York, 1952).

<sup>39</sup> *Dialogues* IV, 50, 2

<sup>40</sup> *De virginibus velandis* 17,3, ed. E. Dekkers in *Corpus Christianorum: Series Latina: Tertulliani Opera: Pars I: Opera Catholica: Adversus Marcionem* (Turnhout, 1953), vol. 2, pp. 1207-26 at p. 1226.25.

<sup>41</sup> Adomnán of Iona, *Life of St Columba*, trans. Richard Sharpe (London 1995), pp. 108-9. Alio in tempore, cum vir praedicabilis in Hinba commoraretur insula, quadam nocte in extasi mentis angelum Domini ad se missum vidit, qui in manu vitreum ordinationis regum habebat librum: quem cum vir venerandus de manu angeli accepisset, ab eo iussus, legere coepit. Qui cum secundum quod ei in libro erat commendatum Aidanum in regem ordinare recusaret, quia magis Iogenanum fratrem ejus diligeret, subito angelus, extendens manum, Sanctum percussit flagello, cujus livorosum in ejus latere vestigium omnibus suae diebus permansit vitae. Hocque intulit verbum, 'Pro certo scias,' inquit, 'quia ad te a Deo missus sum cum vitreo libro, ut juxta verba quae in eo legisti, Aidanum in regnum ordines. Quod si obsecundare huic nolueris jussioni, percutiam te iterato.' Adamnan, *Life of Saint Columba, Founder of Hy. Written by Adamnan, Ninth Abbot of that Monastery*, ed., trans. William Reeves (Edinburgh, 1874), as posted in the Corpus of Electronic Texts (CELT) at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/L201040/index.html> and translated at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/T201040/index.html>. See also Alan O. and Marjorie O. Anderson, eds., trans., *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (Oxford, 1991), pp. 190-81.

<sup>42</sup> It is not clear from the text whether these "virgins" are male or female.

<sup>43</sup> *LU* lines 2084-90; Windisch, "Fís Adamnáin," p. 180; John Carey, trans. "Fís Adomnáin: The Vision of Adomnán," in *King of Mysteries: Early Irish Religious Writings* (Dublin, 1998), pp. 261-74, at pp. 267-68. All quotations from this translation.

<sup>44</sup> *Berair ass iarom co mboi co cend mbliadna isin magin sin cen labrad fri nech etir* (lines 85-6).

<sup>45</sup> Augustine, *De Genesi ad litteram*, PL 34: 245-486, Book XII, cols. 453-86; *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John H. Taylor, 2 vols., Ancient Christian Writers 41-2 (New York, 1982), vol. 2, pp. 178-231. All references to this edition.

<sup>46</sup> *Hi corpaib dlútaib dano & i corpaib tiugaidib bias esergi na n-dóeni, & ní i corpaib séimib & rofoellib mar aer nó gáith.* Stokes, ed., "Tidings of the Resurrection," § 19, p. 244-5, as published on line at <http://www.ucc.ie/celt/published/G207001/index.html>

<sup>47</sup> *Cestnaigther didu úair is i corpaib dlúthib & tiugaidib atresat na dóeni cid ar n-apair in t-apstal spirtalda dib. Co m-bad aire at-berad ara chuibde & ara chosmaili intib féin iar n-dligud imfreceai cach baill díaraile, & dano ara n-áille & ara sochraide, ara soilse & ara n-etrochta. Ár taitnébtáit na náim thall amal gréin isind flaith nemda.* Ibid, § 20, pp. 244-5.

<sup>48</sup> *Luid Cú Chulaind lee iarom is tír 7 bert a charpat les* (line 577).

<sup>49</sup> Laeg's journey is recounted at lines 144-228, in the hand of H drawing on the B recension, and again, as a second trip, at lines 455-62, in the hand of M drawing on the A recension. Cú Chulainn's own journey to Mag Mell is recounted at lines 576-684. All but the last two lines of this account are in H's hand, and draw again on the B recension.

<sup>50</sup> *Táinic fer chucu isa tech 7 dessid forsind airiniuch na imdai i mboi Cú Chulaind. . . Luid úadib iarom in fer 7 ní fetatar cia deochaid nó can donluid* (lines 90-1, 120-1). The two versions of the arrival of LiBan are recounted at lines 127-8, 417-8. Fand's tryst with Cú Chulainn occurs at lines 686 ff., but she is simply there with him at Ibor Cinn Tráichta at the opening of the scene. Manannán appears at lines 762-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Tanic iarom Manannán anair do saigid na hingini, 7 ro boi ina fiadnaise 7 níro ráthaig nech dib aní sin acht fand a hóenur* (lines 762-64)

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John H. Taylor, vol.1, p. 12.

<sup>53</sup> Marina Smyth, "The Body, Death, and Resurrection: Perspectives of an Early Irish Theologian," *Speculum* 83 (2008), 531-71, at 532, 535, 570; John Carey, "Werewolves in Medieval Ireland," *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 44 (2002), 37-72, at 46-8. Idem., "The Ecology of Miracles," in *A Single Ray of the Sun: Religious Speculation in Early Ireland* (Andover and Aberystwyth, 1999), pp. 39-73, at pp. 46-9.

<sup>54</sup> The importance of the reliable guide to the validity of revelations in dreams was axiomatic in Macrobius's dream taxonomy, which postulated a type of dream he calls *oraculum*, in which 'a parent, or a pious or revered man, or a priest, or even a god, clearly reveals what will or will not transpire, and what action to take or avoid.' (Macrobius, *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, I.iii.8; p. 90) Such dreams included those of Joseph and of the Magi in the Gospel of Matthew, in which angels were quite literally the messengers of God.

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<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Myles Dillon, ed., *Serglige Con Culainn*, p. x.

<sup>56</sup> Carey, p. 82; Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, "Reflections on *Compert Conchobuir* and *Serglige Con Culainn*," in *Ulidia: Proceedings of the First International Conference on the Ulster Cycle of Tales*, ed. J.P. Mallory and G. Stockman (Belfast, 1994), pp. 85-9.

<sup>57</sup> Carey, p. 82. *Res* occurs at lines 80 and 251 of the *Serglige*.

<sup>58</sup> Edgar M. Slotkin, "Medieval Irish Scribes and Fixed Texts," *Éigse* 17 (1979), 437-50, quotation at 449.

<sup>59</sup> Gregory the Great, *Dialogues*, trans. Odo John Zimmerman, *The Fathers of the Church* 39 (Washington, 1959), Book IV, p. 251.